

Date : 19 February 2017
Series : "You have heard it said, but I say..." ©
Preacher : By Forbes T Maupa
Readings : Leviticus 19:1-2,9-18 Psalm 119:33-40 Matthew 5:38-48

Matthew 5 vs. 38-48: Turning the other cheek



It is an honour and privilege for me to be in your midst to minister to and with you for the very first time. Thanks to your rector Steve who asked me sometime last year to avail myself for this day with you and so let's get down to it.

To a degree, humanity has been hard-wired to react and or respond to acts of aggression and or insult towards it in very specific ways. If someone at our level smacks us, we smack them back and more. If they insult us we do the same and more. If they are beyond our ability, then we look for alternative ways of degrading them maybe by speaking badly about them in their absence or asking someone else to "sort them out" for us. This is what we know! In response to this; the Torah brings the proverbial "tooth for tooth, an eye for an eye" way of responding to the proclivity in human 'nature' to be vengeful. So the Torah is saying; if someone breaks your tooth, don't go and kill them, only break their tooth too. In simple words, the punishment for wrong doing is supposed to be proportional to the offence.

Jesus then says, "*you have heard that they were told, "An eye for an eye, a tooth for a tooth" but what I tell you is this: do not resist those who wrong you. If anyone slaps you on the right cheek, turn and offer him the other also. If someone wants to sue you and takes your shirt, let him have your cloak as well. If someone in authority presses you into service for one mile, go with him two..."*" (Matthew 5 vs. 38-41). What are we to make of this? I want to suggest three ways of dealing with this rather hard to swallow injunction. The easier option is to be dismissive of this text and many like it by simply saying Jesus doesn't really expect us to do this and that he was simply presenting the ideal which is unachievable. Second option is the difficult one, we say let's do it as is because that's what Jesus said and it must be done to the letter. The third option is to consider the Spirit of Jesus when he said this and the context in which he said it which is to be interpreted in our context.

Let us deal with the context for a moment. Within the time Jesus is speaking, there was something of a rule that said, if the army is passing through town, a soldier could pick anyone in the town and demand of them to carry the soldier's baggage for a mile but no further. Anything further would cause an uprising. If the one forced to carry the burden was to then turn and say to the soldier it's ok, let me do it for two miles; that act takes away power from the soldier and hands it over to the one of whom the task was demanded. The slap on the cheek which essentially is the back of the palm slap was one used to show utter contempt of the one being smacked. If someone smacks you and then instead of walking away as if saying you deserve the punishment, Jesus is saying disempower the perpetrator by offering the other cheek thereby surprising them with your form of resistance. The suggestion is that we must subvert violence or any form of wrong doing in a way that surprises and disempowers the evil doer.

I must hasten to say that in a context like ours which is so fraught with violence towards women; these texts can easily be misunderstood and or misinterpreted which will hurt women even further. For me, **Jesus is saying show out the perpetrator for what they are so that they are forced to reflect on their actions.** There is a lot we have been told on how to respond to aggressors in our 'tradition' and 'culture' "But I say to you..." says Jesus. How do we propose to be different in a world bedevilled with vengeance? What is Jesus saying to us? How do we respond to those who hurt and insult us? Jesus is not asking us to be doormats but rather to be subversive and surprise evil with unexpected resistance that shows out evil. Imagine what the soldier who demanded a mile would now do when the 'victim' decides to push for two miles? The soldier would have been forced to say, no you can't do two miles because the law doesn't permit thereby putting the guilt back on the soldier. Subvert evil!